

Independent Features: Hopes and Dreams

version 2.0

an article for Jon Lewis, ed., *New American Cinema* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, forthcoming 1997).

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Since awarding top honors to **Sex, Lies, and Videotape**, in 1989, the Cannes Festival regularly highlighted US independents. With this boost from the most famous international film festival, a snowball effect ensued in public awareness of films produced outside of Hollywood. At Cannes and other prestige festivals, each year brought forward new films and new directors, and often new voices and visions that the mainstream had ignored, silenced, or pushed aside. African American and Asian American cinema expanded with films such as Reggie Hudlin's **House Party**, Leslie Harris' **Another Girl on the IRT**, and Ang Lee's **The Wedding Banquet**. More and more women directors seemed to break through such as Allison Anders (**Gas Food Lodging**) and Mira Nair (**Mississippi Masala**), and gay and lesbian characters and stories multiplied in films by new directors such as Tom Kalin (**Swoon**) and Rose Troche (**Go Fish**). Some former upstart independents such as John Sayles and Spike Lee were now well established.

By the mid-1990's the low budget independent theatrical feature film gained enough consistent attention in the market place and public eye that such films were regularly reviewed across the media spectrum. A prime showcase for independent features by new directors, the Sundance Film Festival, became so well known that *Vanity Fair's* April 1996 cover could headline: Special Issue: Hollywood '96, From Sundance to Sunset. Becoming a household word, and

lending its name to a new cable tv channel highlighting independent films, Sundance stood for a new, but well publicized phenomenon: the low budget off-Hollywood film offering something distinctly different from the big studios' star-driven blockbuster genres.

With the success at Cannes and at the box office of **Pulp Fiction**, the entertainment press wrote another chapter of the American success myth with the story of how Quentin Tarantino went from video store clerk wannabe to big time director, screenwriter, and celebrity. At this writing, bookstores display Robert Rodriguez's autobiographical book, *Rebel Without a Crew: Or How a 23-Year -Old Filmmaker with \$7,000 Became a Hollywood Player*, detailing the making of **El Mariachi**.

For many critics, hopeful filmmakers, aspiring writers and directors, and filmgoers looking for a film alternative to mainstream studio generic fare, the phenomenon of Sundance Films, or Off-Hollywood, or Indy Features promised a new alternative. But to what extent is it truly different? To what extent does it challenge the status quo? In order to answer these questions we have to start with a broader context; we must first look at the dominant institution--Hollywood cinema--in order to understand the alternatives. Hollywood is more than just a place in Southern California where about 200 dramatic feature films are made each year. It is also a financing system, and a national and international distribution and exhibition enterprise. Its publicity, promotion, and marketing system crosses over into media celebrity, journalistic reviewing, advertising, and the marketing of associated products and images. Hollywood is intimately woven into popular television from stars promoting their new films with David Letterman and Jay Leno through highlighted stories on **Entertainment Tonight** and politicians denouncing media sex and violence on the news, to recycled film references in **The Animaniacs**. It also exists as a lynch

pin of key video and broadcasting forms: the broadcast, cable, and videocassette (sales and rental) markets. It is the dominant force in international entertainment media. The rest of filmmaking exists below, beyond, subordinated, or in some other relation to Hollywood.

“Independent,” then, has to be understood as a relational term-- independent in relation to the dominant system--rather than taken as indicating a practice that is totally free-standing and autonomous. But individual filmmakers who don't understand this often end up frustrating and compromising their own efforts. In the US, independent feature filmmaking (mostly dramatic fictional narratives, although some are theatrical documentaries such as **Roger and Me** and **Hoop Dreams**) always involves a tension between Art and Commerce. For some media people, making an independent fiction feature is merely a first step towards a successful career within the dominant industry. The independent film is a “calling card” which allows Hollywood executives to see what a new director can do with a low budget project so that s/he might be hired into a three-picture deal: probably assigned to a genre slot-- horror, teen romance or comedy, neo-noir, action-adventure, homeboys/gangsta, etc. From the industry's point of view, contracting former independent directors gets them young talent that will work cheap, finish films on time and on budget, and to the producer's specifications. Of course, some indie directors have insisted on remaining independent: Jim Jarmusch, for example (**Stranger Than Paradise, Down By Law**). And some take on big budget projects unsuccessfully, such as Gus Van Sant (**Even Cowgirls Get the Blues**). The other major routes into a directing career are : (1) film schools, with the American Film Institute, University of Southern California, New York University, and the University of California at Los Angeles, being the best known; (2) apprenticeship in the industry, including television, with some cross-over from writing, acting, music,

etc.; and (3) being born into the industry and having the family or business connections to jump start a career.

From such a start, a young media maker hopes for frequent opportunities to direct, or write and direct, films which are both commercially successful (so as to keep on making films), creatively satisfying and critically esteemed. The expectation is to get more and more creative control over one's projects. The underlying concept here is based in the critical idea of the *auteur*, which places an emphasis on the director. The *auteur* theory postulated that some directors within the studio system could use commercial films as creative, expressive vehicles. (Such a notion of authorship is opposed to the elitist high culture dismissal of an industrial popular culture as inherently inartistic, and the dominant Hollywood view that stars and producers are the most important, and directors are interchangeable, and if too "creative"--like Orson Welles--not worth dealing with.) Originally formulated by post-WW2 French critics as part of an aesthetic justification for Hollywood films, this notion of the director-as-*auteur* was popularized in the US by Andrew Sarris and others, validating figures such as Alfred Hitchcock and Douglas Sirk, who had been widely perceived previously in critical circles as talented craftsmen or just skilled entertainers rather than true artists. In the 1970s authorship seemed to fit a flock of new young directors such as Scorsese, Spielberg, Coppola, Lucas, de Palma, etc. who worked within the commercial system in general, but who also made some films which seemed especially personally important to them and which were highly regarded as cinematic art by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, by the public, and by critics: **Taxi Driver**, **Jaws**, **The Godfather I and II**, **Apocalypse Now**, etc. And having established themselves, these directors have continued to make work which demonstrate their artistry and personal vision: **Shindler's List** and **Bram Stoker's Dracula**, for example.

The upbeat positive side of the authorship myth validates those mainstream directors who combine personal vision with box office success. But it downplays those directors who regularly produce financially successful films taken as merely entertaining, such as John Hughes (**Sixteen Candles; Planes, Trains & Automobiles; Uncle Buck**). And it forgets those directors who start strong but whose career stumbles at the box office such as Hal Ashby (**Harold and Maude, Shampoo, Being There**) and Peter Bogdanovich (**Targets, Paper Moon, The Last Picture Show**). For those directors written off as has-beens by studio executives, the myth provides the solace of validating their Art even though they failed at Commerce. But it can also cut two ways for those permanently ensconced in Hollywood. Thus Kevin Costner gets a large boost for directing his first time out pet project, **Dances With Wolves**, but loses big time when **Waterworld** is a financial and critical flop, even though he didn't direct it..

The filmmaking aspiration

In the 1990s authorship and hype fueled the full blown emergence of an earlier trend-- the filmmaking aspiration. By this I mean that for a significant number of (mostly young) people, the desire to make films is a very strong motivation, even if they cannot successfully pursue it. Beyond that, filmmaking becomes a daydream entertained by many more, creating the infrastructure for attending to the activity. In other words, enough people care about the fantasy of becoming a filmmaker, that they glom onto the legend of the young auteur breaking through--Spike Lee, the Hughes Brothers, Quentin Tarantino, Robert Rodriguez, Allison Anders--and find it pleasurable. Just as an earlier generation of American intellectuals interested in narrative expression aspired to become novelists, by the end of the 20th century, the goal of becoming a screenwriter or

screen writer/ director (or sometimes independent producer) was an important part of many young peoples' imaginations. The desire was fueled by examples of success--young people with little or no experience or training, or family advantage who managed to break through. In an otherwise devolving future for Gen Xers, new opportunities seemed to open up as film exhibition changed, and the expansion of cable, new telecommunications technologies, and delivery systems called for a drastic increase in creative product.

The situation developed into something resembling a feeding frenzy with film magazines such as *Premiere*, *Movieline*, *Film Threat*, *Sight and Sound*, and *Moviemaker* highlighting new independent work--as in the obligatory reports from Sundance, Telluride, and other festivals--and purporting to provide inside information on the phenomenon and scene of Hollywood wannabees. (Why, we should ask, if the scene is so hot, are all these people occupied in writing trend-spotting journalism rather than being involved in production themselves?)

The expansion of media programs in higher education ranging from community colleges to research universities offered aspiring students the promise that they could train and qualify for positions in the industry. For those out of school, intense "insider" screenwriting workshops and weekend lecture series are packaged much like motivational lecture programs on how-to-make a million in foreclosed real estate or government property, doing mail-order business, or selling Amway or Herbalife from home. For yet others, an abundance of do-it-yourself books offered a cheap fix such as: Rick Schmidt, *Feature Filmmaking at Used-car Prices: How to Write, Produce, Direct, Film, Edit, and Promote a Feature-Length Film for Less than \$10,000*, John A. Russo, *How to Make your own Feature Movie for \$10,000 or Less.*, and Gregory Goodell, *Independent Feature Film Production: A Complete Guide from Concept to Distribution.*¹

History

Independent production and diffusion (a term I'll use to indicate distribution, including marketing and exhibition) was the norm, when cinema was starting. But by the 1920s a dominant structure, the Hollywood studio system, was already firmly in place and all other cinematic expressions existed in some kind of relationship to it. Within Hollywood, there was even an attempt to stand apart from the studios when stars such as Chaplin, Fairbanks, and Pickford formed United Artists in an effort to maintain more control over production and profits. At the same time, independence outside of the studio system was embodied in figures such as Oscar Micheaux, an African American entrepreneur, author, and filmmaker who produced about one dramatic film a year for exhibition in theatres serving black communities.² Similarly, in New York, in the 1930s, Yiddish films growing out of the Yiddish theatre, were regularly produced for a special subculture.³

In the 1930s the studio system created a new marginalized form, the B film. To attract Depression audiences, many theatres began the practice of running two feature films, along with a newsreel, animated cartoon and travelogue, making a full evening of entertainment. Within the major studios, production of these lower budget films kept the studios' investment in capital facilities and equipment in operation, the screen talent and production personnel steadily occupied, as well as providing a second film product for the theatres they owned or effectively controlled. But the custom also created the space for the minor studios, including bare-bones Poverty Row outfits like Monogram, Mascot, and Republic, to maintain the industrial production of extremely low budget films. This was the territory of genre films such as cheap horror and

westerns, with extremely spare sets and costumes, the minimal number of takes, and so forth. (For example, the serial **Secret Service in Darkest Africa**, the Bowery Boys juvenile comedies, **The Spanish Cape Mystery**--based on an Ellery Queen novel.) Within this framework, some directors were able to produce films that went beyond hack work.⁴

Along with the B-genre films, exploitation films “exploited” the marketplace. Ranging from sensation and pornography to niche specialization, exploitation films in the 30’s and 40’s derived from the carnival practice of maximum sensational publicity to get an audience on the basis of promising more than could be delivered. The horrors of drug addiction, the sensational aspects of prostitution and sexual disease, childbirth, and other hot topics dressed up with a puritanical policing discourse were typical subjects.⁵ **Reefer Madness, Mom and Dad**, and **Dust to Dust** are examples. This marginal trend continued in the post WW2 era when exhibition patterns changed again. As television took over much of the family entertainment sector in the 1950s, specialized film markets emerged such as the teen-oriented film (**The Wild One, Rock Around the Clock**), the drive-in film (**Caged, Beach Party, Evel Knievel**), and later the blaxploitation film (**Shaft, Coffy, Superfly**). Again, despite the films’ formulaic nature and low budget, some directors were able to make interesting pictures, or to use such opportunities as stepping stones to the mainstream. Given the guarantee of available venues to screen a B film once it was completed, it was also possible for a driven eccentric, such as Ed Wood, to make some features (such as **Glen or Glenda**, and **Plan 9 from Outer Space**) from minimal bankrolling, and incredibly cheap production.

With the emergence of an art house exhibition system in the post war period, it was possible for some to make expressive films intended as cinematic art as well as entertainment that could at least make a modest profit. The social problem dramas **The Quiet One** and **Lost Boundaries** are examples. The art house audience enjoyed (mostly European) dramatic features that addressed a presumably more serious, more educated audience, such as the Italian neo-realist films **The Bicycle Thief** and **Bitter Rice**, and the British comedy **Kind Hearts and Coronets**). The creation of a clearly defined art house audience in turn encouraged further production of this type allowing a steady and sometimes increasing production of films with more artistic pretensions, serious themes, and interest to a more specialized audience.⁶

In the 1960s a new generation of independent filmmakers appeared who constituted an American New Wave. Often identified as the New American cinema, the movement ranged from short visually complex experimental works through cinéma vérité documentaries to unique dramatic features. Some of these films attained widespread distribution, most notably some documentaries such as **Endless Summer**, and **Point of Order!**, and some intended for television broadcast such as Fred Wiseman's **Hospital** and **Basic Training**, or performance documentaries which made theatrical debuts such as Bert Stern's **Jazz on a Summer's Day** or the Maysles' **Gimme Shelter**. On the art house front, a wide range of critically esteemed, though not always hugely commercially successful dramatic films appeared in the 60s: Cassavetes' **Shadows, Faces**, and **Husbands**, Shirley Clarke's **The Connection** and **The Cool World**, Robert Young's **Nothing But a Man**, Frank Perry's **David and Lisa**, and Joseph Strick's **The Balcony**. Because the Hollywood system in the 1960s and 1970s was unable to adapt quickly and effectively to a changing culture, Baby Boom demographics, and

economic changes, instability created more opportunities for new directors who could occupy the in-between places during a time of upheaval and drastic change. The 1980s saw more stability in the mainstream production and distribution, but also the concerted efforts of new institutions such as the Sundance Institute and the Independent Feature Project promoting the development of off-Hollywood product.⁷

While these films varied from the dominant Hollywood *product*, they still worked within the logic of the dominant *system*, occupying the relatively freer areas of the margins and in-betweens of the conventional industry. What is important to understand is that with changes in finance, in production process, in distribution, in exhibition, that is, in the material forces of production, and in the cultural environment, and the audience and its own cultural and historical development, different elements can combine with others and as a result new possibilities emerge. Part of the phenomenon of independence is also due to the fact that very large industries such as Hollywood by their very nature are not totally rationalized in all respects. Rather, they have, in the course of their evolution, changes which present new (often temporary) options, gaps that can be filled. The corollary of this thesis is that much smaller cinema systems, such as in the various European countries, can in fact be managed in much more consistent ways and are often much less open to new options.

Independence today

Dreams of *independence*, dreams by *independents* are often the stuff of fantasy and illusion because no matter how low-budget one goes in production, it is the dominant capitalist system which defines the basic structures. One of the most enduring structures of the present era is the basic economic truth that for

Hollywood, *money is made on hits*. Since the breakup of the vertically integrated studio system after WW2, with ownership extending from finance and studio operations to local theatres, people who finance film production are playing a speculative game of producing a number of films, many of which will fail to make back their costs, in hopes that one will become the megahit. Today the dominant film form is the “high concept” model, in which stars and genres mesh to produce a new product which is already always familiar and which can be easily and obviously marketed through tv advertising.⁸ A high concept film can be pitched in one sentence, something repeatedly well parodied in Robert Altman’s comic satire **The Player**. It can be promoted in one image: Travolta dancing the Hustle in **Saturday Night Fever**, the costumed figure of **Batman**, blowing up the White House in **Independence Day**. These films depend on the already known: many are based on previous pop culture like comics and tv shows, the generically familiar, stars, and a signature style (high production values, stupendous special effects, and attractive audio/visual design).

The high concept mode of filmmaking aims at exploiting a specific marketing strategy, one that has developed with changing institutions. First, the release pattern for films slated to be blockbusters relies on the interacting synergy of multiplex theatres, saturation tv (and some print) advertising, star/celebrity, and merchandising. From the early 1970s on, the older pattern of staggered theatrical release (in which films ran at certain prime theatres for long runs, followed by gradual release to neighborhood, small town, and drive in markets over time) has changed to the current norm of nationwide saturation presentation at multiplexes which can open a film in several rooms at once to maximize attendance, and then shift down to small spaces as the run wears on and the audience shrinks. This national breakout is highlighted by saturation

advertising and extensive hyping of the new film immediately before release. Letterman and Leno are simply the most obvious cases: their guest lists are trimmed exactly to the next weekend's releases. With ancillary tie-ins such as Lion King and Pocahantas tee-shirts and McDonald's meals and Space Jam toys, anticipation builds before a film appears, guaranteeing a pre-sold desire to see the film and to continue the circulation of the films' image after viewing.

Conventional thinking in the industry assumes that any new film has at most a three week window of opportunity to become a hit. Most films today "make it or break it" the three days of their first weekend in release. Since active movie goers can see only one or two films a weekend, and Hollywood is releasing over 200 a year, on any one weekend only one or two new releases will be able to gather a top audience. If a film doesn't fly the first weekend, it might be possible to recoup something with a change in promotion and advertising the second and third weekend, especially if the film can exploit positive word-of-mouth.

Release patterns are also governed by demographic considerations. Holiday weekends supply important launch points and often highlight a kid-oriented feature such as **Toy Story** or **101 Dalmatians**. Black and Latino themed works premiere in urban centers, with some hope for a suburban cross over. But many neighborhoods remain underscreened. When basketball star Magic Johnson recently opened a multiplex in South Central Los Angeles gaining record attendance, industry "experts" were surprised that the community chose to attend the only cinema for many miles in their community.

Similarly, demographics influence the successful release of films aimed at women and girls. The underserved female audience takes longer to get to see films for numerous reasons: women and girls typically make less than men--compare baby-sitting and yard work--, have more family obligations, have less disposable income to spend on entertainment, and in heterosexual dating the convention is that the guy, who usually is paying, gets to choose most of the time. But word of mouth and going in a group are more characteristic of females. Thus some women's films have built more slowly (such as **Thelma and Louise**) than overnight male action blockbusters, but have "long legs" and can run many weeks in one of the theaters of a multiplex, often developing repeat viewings. **Little Women**, **Sense and Sensibility**, **Girls on the Side**, and **Like Water for Chocolate**, are cases in point.

Some numbers

The major studios released 212 movies in 1995. John Pierson estimates that about 400 independent features are produced every year.⁹ Now that's an arguable figure because it includes not just extreme low budget films by new screenwriters and directors, but also some carefully crafted features for cable and direct-to-video which are made with union crews and which are relatively low risk bets (examples would be John Dahl's **Red Rock West** or **The Last Seduction**, Zalman King's **Wild Orchid** and other erotic thrillers), because they can be easily sold or even pre-sold. Cable or direct-to-video niche genres require virtually no promotion and advertising budget. But even discounting those parts of the low budget independent market, we still have well over 200 films every year that compete for attention in the Independent Feature Film Market

(the annual fall showcase in New York for completed and in-progress work) and for festival slots at Sundance, Telluride, New York, Toronto, San Francisco, and other major festivals which are important venues for independent work. Some of these films do get festival screenings but do not get distribution deals. Some get distribution deals but do not succeed at the box office.

In the US there are about 26,500 movie screens in about 10,000 houses. Half of those screens are effectively controlled by the major Hollywood studios. The largest art house chain, Landmark, owns about 120 theatres, but for the past few years it has been owned by the financially troubled Goldwyn Company, and the chain may be sold off. It's quite possible that new owners could judge Landmark as less profitable as an art house chain and turn it to mainstream product. Thus the largest and most stable set of venues for independent features could disappear overnight, leaving indy distributors with costly product with no outlets, and producers and directors without a future.

Essentially, Hollywood--the dominant capitalist film entertainment system--has increasingly come to use the low budget independent films as an inexpensive, low risk source for an increasingly differentiated market, and as a kind of minor league training ground for new talent who, if they succeed, will then be brought into the majors. Rather than investing its own money in initial production, the industry sponsors--by purchasing distribution rights in some cases or by optioning a filmmaker's next film-- a highly speculative system in which about 300 independent films a year are winnowed down to about 30 a year which are released nationally, and about 10 which are profitable or at least come close to returning their investment. However, the dominant aspect of the system remains the blockbuster model, and the upper levels of Hollywood

decision making are concerned exclusively with highly speculative projects (in search of the prospective megahit), not with small or modest return films. Industry execs don't make their career by having a long string of films that return a modest profit but rather by having big hits that return massively on investment. Hollywood is governed by a highly speculative mode of capitalism.¹⁰

With this understanding of the dominant system as a background, we can better understand the actual situation for independents. First of all, financing production for independents is significantly different than for major studio projects. The majors finance a project up front and monitor progress to make sure budgets are being met. In contrast, independents almost always finance production from a variety of sources in a series of stages before distribution is secured. Money is cobbled together from the filmmaker, family and friends, speculative investors, and in some cases institutions such as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, or in the past, the National Endowment for the Arts or the American Film Institute.

Many parts of the initial labor for the scriptwriter and director in particular, involve deferred payment. Production personnel and screen talent may work on deferment as well. Often the crew is nonunion, or sometimes a union crew works under a special arrangement for lower or deferred salaries. However, if unionized (which guarantees a certain level of professional skill and experience), certain standards for meals and accommodations must be met, which makes much location shooting extremely expensive. It would be impossible, for example, to do a "road movie" involving different scenes in different geographic places on a limited budget. Casting scenes with many

extras, ensemble acting, numerous open air scenes that depend on consistent weather also present economic problems. Of course these limits can be turned to a distinct advantage by an imaginative and talented director. Thus a small cast and limited interior locations are exploited to great effect in such independent films as Jim Jarmuch's **Stranger Than Paradise**, Soderburgh's **Sex, Lies and Videotape**, Hal Hartley's **Trust**, Anders' **Gas Food Lodging**, Lee's **She's Got To Have It.**, Wayne Wang's **Dim Sum**, and even Tarantino's **Reservoir Dogs**.

One much hyped aspect of independent features--working on bare bones budgets--is extremely misleading to the uninformed. It makes good copy to say someone shot their first feature on \$100,000 or \$25,000 or even \$7,000 but the realities are very different. For example, Robert Rodriguez gained a lot of attention for the claim that he made his first feature **El Mariachi** for \$7,000 in out of pocket expenses. But this disguises numerous details. First of all, that figure covered only the initial outlay for film stock and processing. Rodriguez was "discovered" while in the editing stage of his film (actually a making a videotape rough version) and then signed to a deal which allowed him to finish editing and pay for the blow up to 35mm, the cost of optical effects (such as fades and dissolves), the remixing of all sound including extensive foley (sound stage) work, payment for music rights and so forth to bring the film to completion. Beyond that was the distributor's cost of prints, advertising, negotiating distribution and exhibition deals, and residual sales abroad as well as cable tv and video cassette sales. The actual cost of the film was hundreds of thousands, perhaps several million, not a few thousand dollars. The myth of **El Mariachi** also omits that Rodriguez borrowed rather than rented his equipment, shot a type of film that did not require skilled physical acting or dialogue delivery or

synch sound recording. With a minuscule cast and crew, and by editing his rough cut at cable access on video, living and working at home and thus having no office or overhead expenses, Rodriguez did the production and post production with remarkable efficiency.

The legend also omits the fact that Rodriguez had made and edited little videotape “movies” at home since becoming a teen, so he actually had 10 years of experience and thousands of hours of shooting and editing experience with narratives before starting on this project, which was initially intended to be a Mexican action film--a genre popular and well established in Mexico and the US Southwest--with typically very low production values. That’s what Rodriguez was aiming for when he was picked up by US producers who spotted his work as similar to the newly discovered Hong Kong director John Woo who had influenced Tarantino and others. So part of his success is due to being in the right spot at the right time, but his ingenious and aggressive improvisation and years of previous experience were crucial to his being catapulted into successful distribution.

Unlike the major studio projects which are guaranteed finance at all stages from script and star acquisition through production to distribution and advertising, independents face new financial hurdles at each stage. Getting a film to a completed video edit or securing one print for festival submission becomes the central goal to gain a distribution deal. Such contacts can range from selling the film outright to attempting to arrange a percentage of the gross or net profits after distribution expenses.¹¹ (However, the naive should remember that given Hollywood’s peculiar accounting practices, a film such as **Forrest Gump**--third highest grossing film ever--still has not returned any net profits.)

Taking a fully completed film from festival screening to full-scale exhibition is a very expensive venture which ties up capital. Opening a film nationally involves making costly prints, an expense paid by the distributor. In the case of a high concept film intended to be a blockbuster, hundreds of prints are needed for simultaneous national release in theatres. And multiplexes may be showing it on several screens at once, so a print is needed for each projection space.

In the 1990's, "average" Hollywood films have completion costs \$30 million range, added to a standard of \$10-\$15 million for advertising (and up to \$40+ million for megahits). Given such an industry practice, it is easy to see that however low budget an independent film is in production costs, it is still massively expensive to compete in the same market to get attention. In addition, mainstream films have the advantage of star power to get promotional attention from *People* magazine, *Entertainment Tonight*, talk shows, etc. while independents must rely on a promotion to a smaller audience through specialty publications. The dominant system also sets the terms for distribution/exhibition economics. In general, distributors of big hits can drive a harder bargain with exhibitors, who expect to make a profit on popcorn and concessions as well as on volume of patronage. But the reverse obtains for small market films--exhibitors expect to get a larger percentage of the gate for themselves because of the smaller audience. As businessmen, distributors are in the position of advancing money for the expenses of prints and advertising against expected returns from exhibition, and they want to pay off those expenses first, before sharing anything with the filmmaker. Quite reasonably, they expect to make back their money and a profit before sharing it.

There are a relatively small number of theatres that regularly screen independent features. So, although some films may break through into the

mainstream world of multiplexes, as **Sex, Lies and Videotape** did, most of the indy features are shown at art house theatres, such as the 120 or so run by the Landmark chain in Yuppie and Gen X singles neighborhoods in urban areas and college towns which have well established, loyal audiences. There is some room for slotting independents into multiplexes, especially when there isn't enough successful product to go around in the mainstream. But multiplexes do not provide a stable and predictable environment for independents who can be easily squeezed out of a studio film might make more money on the same screen.

The filmmaker may see money returned from foreign sales, sales to cable tv, and videocassette sales, and this may be a significant part of the revenue return for some filmmakers. For example, veteran independent director John Sayles (**Matewan, Lianna, Lone Star**) has observed,

[Video] is not the ideal way to see a movie. But we're aware, just like any Hollywood director is aware, that more than half the people who see your movie are not going to see it on the big screen. That's just the way it works these days. But it's one of the reasons independent film has flourished. We financed two of our movies through home video pre-sales. If video did not exist, or cable, there'd be a lot fewer independent filmmakers running around.¹²

However, for an unknown director, this area is much less reliable. Foreign sales are a better bet for films such as martial arts action and erotic thrillers which can be followed with minimal attention to dialogue/subtitles. The so-called "little personal film" stressing dialogue, character drama, and acting is a hard sell in virtually every theatrical and ancillary market.

Critical investment

While occupying an economic and aesthetic position at the edge of the mainstream commercial cinema, independent films represent a large critical investment for some people. These are the kinds of films that cinephiles, media teachers and students, and many liberal intellectuals often like to watch (at their local art house) or on PBS, or a specialty cable channel, or, in small college towns without an art house, in the form of rent-by-mail from Chicago's Facets Multimedia (the biggest distributor of such films on video) so they can overcome the cultural deprivation of the heartland. These are films like **Art for Teachers of Children, The Devil Never Sleeps, Safe, or Clean, Shaven**, that were shown at the 1996 annual meeting of the Society for Cinema Studies, the professional organization for film teachers. They are films which some members of SCS give papers on: **Clerks, Hoop Dreams, Liquid Sky, Speaking Parts, Household Saints**, and (arguably) **Pulp Fiction**. These are the films most film teachers like to teach and often (implicitly or explicitly) hold up as models for aspiring students who want to make films. These are the films that teachers and critics might even daydream about making themselves.

Film critics and teachers are, after all, the ones who tell the legendary story of the *Cahiers du cinéma* critics (Jean-Luc Godard, Alain Renais, François Truffaut, Jacques Rivette, etc.) becoming the French New Wave--the early 60's creative outburst of new French cinema. They are the ones who discuss Orson Welles' career in Hollywood as a tragedy. They are the ones who are most attracted to legends of author directors who succeed on their own terms within the system such as Robert Altman, John Cassavetes, Woody Allen, or Spike Lee.

This critical investment is grounded in something worth validating: the artistically accomplished dramatic feature which speaks to (and sometimes with , and sometimes for) an audience that wants entertainment and enlightenment through a film that seems to express an artist's vision. These are the films that cinephiles, critics, scholars, teachers, journalists, curators, preservationists, and intellectuals validate. Scholars don't have any influence on box office success, but they are the ones who construct the canon of works, write the histories, argue the moral, social, and artistic value of those films produced. For example: Charles Burnett's **Killer of Sheep** , a film which never had a commercial release, is in the National Registry of Film Preservation because film scholars validated it.¹³ And Oscar Micheaux's work is receiving the re-evaluation it deserves because of SCS members.

The concern for low budget independent films has been a vital part of identity and constituency political developments in film studies: feminists gay/lesbian/queer, African American, Latino, Asian American, and other critics and scholars have all focused attention on significant feature length films and created the context of intellectual discussion necessary for coalescing and developing an ongoing audience awareness as well as a critical discourse among makers, exhibitors, critics and the public. The prime example would be Marlon Rigg's **Tongues Untied**, which not only spoke from, for, and to a black gay male experience, but also in fact helped bring community and public awareness and politics into being. The video, which rapidly circulated in both public forums and through private copies passed hand to hand, functioned as a starting point for discussion and organization of a nationwide constituency brought to self awareness through the vehicle of the tape. At times some such films occupy an importance within critical discourse far out of proportion to their actual aesthetic

or political value: for example, **She Must Be Seeing Things** (Sheila McLaughlin, 1988) was vastly overvalued by some lesbian-feminist critics simply because it was the first narrative feature of its kind depicting the complexity of lesbian love relations and fantasies, and thus it allowed certain critical and political issues to be discussed.¹⁴ Today, with more lesbian dramatic features in existence, the breakthrough film seems pale by comparison. Lizzie Borden's **Born in Flames** provides a similar case for feminist discussions.¹⁵

However, the considerable intellectual (and emotional) investment that some people have in these films should not blind us to some *other* investments that people have--and I mean financial monetary investments that people--individuals and corporations-- make in order to make money in the film industry. In other words, a personal libidinal and social economy must be balanced in analysis with a political economy. Independent features can be viewed as either/both a cultural phenomenon or/and an economic one. For some, entering this field is simply a stepping stone to the big time of Hollywood. For example, Edward Burns made the dramatically conventional feature **The Brothers McMullen** for about \$100,000, showed a two hour rough cut at the Independent Feature Film Market in 1994, and sold the film to Fox Searchlight for a bit over \$1,000,000. The film went on to gross over \$10,200,000 domestic, hitting 367 screens at its widest point of release.¹⁶ For others, personal expression and/or social-political statement may be more important than economic rewards. Thus the field always contains diverse motivations.

Independence alone does not confer political, social, or aesthetic value. But there is a long standing connection between *some* independent feature films and political advocacy or minority cultural expression. The left-wing project

Native Land (d. Paul Strand, 1942) and **Salt of the Earth** (d. Herbert J. Biberman, 1954), made by blacklisted artists in the McCarthy era, provide significant examples. Similarly, films such as Lionel Rogosin's **Look Back Africa** (set in the black community of South Africa) and Robert Young's **Nothing But a Man**, and **The Ballad of Gregorio Cortez**, demonstrate the possibility of making politically acute and dramatically effective independent films. But many of the lessons learned by independents are sobering. Critic Michele Wallace describes the tension between optimism and realism for African Americans:

The Spike Lee phenomenon began [in 1986] with the mistaken assumption, on his part and everybody else's, that blacks making their "own" films would improve the quality of black representation in the public sphere. ...We can now see that the notion of blacks making their "own" films presupposed the existence of a monolithic black community, unified enough to possess a common ideology, ethics, morality, and culture, sufficient to override such competing and divisive interests as class, gender, sexuality, age, and education. Also implicit in this formulation of blacks having their "own" films was the nagging question as to whether such representations would somehow make black people's lives better overall. Regardless of whether a film has any value as art, it can, if it chooses, closely mirror or reflect the problems and inequalities of its society. People make the mistake of thinking that a film can therefore also correct inequalities. This is because we, as a culture, are still trying to figure out what representation fully means in a still new and exponentially expanding forms: what such

forms can and can't do, what we should and should not ask of them.¹⁷

Some lessons of independent low budget film

1. Low budget independent features do not make a huge net profit. A gross of \$2-6 million (considered very good in this sector) can easily be eaten up by expenses and shares. Independent filmmaking is not a dependable way to make a living.

2. The net back to the original director/producer is almost never enough to finance production of another film. For the director, it is at best the start of a track record to make another film (which is usually much more within the Hollywood system). Spike Lee is a good example: although moderately budgeted and generally successful, his films have had to seek funding from scratch each time out.

3. The films that are the most successful within this particular system tend to be those with a clearly marked niche market. For example, John Pierson characterized the audience for Julie Dash's **Daughters of the Dust** as "black women who read Toni Morrison novels," and the marketing of the film carefully developed that audience.¹⁸ The film **Crumb** was a sure thing with the legion of the adult comic artist's fans, and then picked up some critical acclaim. And **Go Fish** and **The Incredible True Story of Two Girls in Love** were eagerly viewed by the unserved young lesbian market.

4. But when a niche is identified, Hollywood then steps in with its own vehicle: the success of independent gay features shows that you can sell **Philadelphia**. **Daughters of the Dust** demonstrated a market potential filled by **Waiting to Exhale**. And in almost every case, the Hollywood copycat is less imaginative, less political, and less interesting than the original. But, it then sets the terms for the continuation of the terms of that niche. So, while independents can initially gain a leg up through constituency markets, once identified, independents must compete with the mainstream industry's attempt to exploit the same market. Thus the Gen X hit **Slackers** opens the space for the star-powered **Reality Bites**. And Richard Linklater goes from the unpolished roughness of **Slackers** to **Dazed and Confused**,...nice enough as a teen comedy, but no more than that, and a good deal less than, say, the most successful independent teen picture of all time, **American Graffiti**.

5. Conditions of financing, distribution, and exhibition are changing rapidly. The current deregulation of telecommunications and the rapidly changing delivery technologies promise more change. Last year's strategy may be totally wrong for next year's situation. For example, current reports indicate that Direct to Video may be oversaturated¹⁹ And there is a clear distributor and critical backlash against the glut of no-talent films being produced by opportunists for the independent feature market. As the number of films made increases, the percentage of worthy ones has declined.

Future prospects

The pressure of the market place is decisive in shaping the continuing work of independents. Thus any further analysis must recognize:

1. Some new directors are simply interested in making a calling card film to enter the mainstream and thus use low budget as an alternative to (expensive) film school. When we reflect that going to USC, NYU or UCLA costs about \$120,000 for four years (plus costs of filmmaking), there is a certain logic for an 18 year old to simply hit up mom and dad for enough to make a feature.

2. To continue to make auteur cinema within the present system is increasingly tenuous. In the 80s NEA /NEH/ AFI and foundation grants and co-productions with Channel 4 (in the UK) and German television helped out many young filmmakers. Today those opportunities seem to be gone forever.

3. Appealing to or exploiting constituency markets is risky business. If successful, independents risk competition from the mainstream industry for the same market. Identification of a constituency market may hurt the very institutions that initially created the phenomenon. For example, B. Ruby Rich's trumpeting of a New Queer Cinema of feature films in the *Village Voice* and *Sight and Sound* a few years ago²⁰ had the effect of distributors and potential distributors telling filmmakers that they should *not* show their features at gay /lesbian/ queer festivals because it would disrupt the later marketing plan. Thus the identity festivals which created a market and demand and which had highlighted features in premieres, opening nights and festival closings and awards were subsequently cut off. And some filmmakers have betrayed their bad faith and bad politics by then arguing that they don't want to be "ghettoized" in such festivals which gave them their first recognition and encouragement.

4. Many alternative distributors are not really independent. New Line is owned by Turner Broadcasting which is now owned by Time Warner. Miramax is currently carrying 50 some independent features in initial release or some stage of pre-release which means they have more product under their control than some studios release in a year. Miramax, now a mini-major, is a subsidiary of the mammoth Disney Corporation.

Hopes, Dreams, and Reality Checks

We shouldn't be naive about the actual constraints on "independent" film. But we shouldn't be cynical or despairing about it either. Independence is not just a state of mind, it is a set of potentials that can only be realized in a real world situation with real economic institutions and constraints. Knowing what those are gives the filmmaker a much better chance of being successful in aesthetic terms as well as economic ones. And for the critic and viewer of independent work, knowing the field provides an important context for assessing specific films. The legendary stories of filmmaking make for interesting reading and daydreaming. But in the long run, an informed audience is a better one for ensuring the lasting position of the independent sector.

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⁶Barbara Wilinsky, "An Alternative Mode of Film Exhibition: The Rise of Art Houses After World War II," diss., Northwestern University, forthcoming 1997.

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p. 204.

¹⁰The Begelman affair provides a classic example. A studio exec was caught red-handed stealing money from the firm, but eventually kept his position in the industry because he was considered otherwise quite successful in the movie business. For a case study:

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¹¹For a full discussion of distribution economics see

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¹² John Sayles, quoted from interview with Michael Janusonis, Providence (RI) Journal Bulletin, July 19, 1996, quoted by Jim Marsden on H-Net List for Scholarly Studies and Uses of Media (20 July 1996).

¹³Full disclosure: I gave the first SCS paper on Burnett's film. "Charles Burnett's KILLER OF SHEEP," Society for Cinema Studies, UCLA, June 1982, on a panel I organized: "Independent Black, Chicano, and Asian Filmmaking in Los Angeles." The Society as a whole was instrumental in establishing the Registry, along with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and other industry and library interests. The registry marks films which have aesthetic and historical importance and which the relevant institutions attempt to preserve as part of our film heritage

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p. 208

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